INTO THE WORLD

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Psalm 1
John 17: 6-19
Acts 1: 6-14

"As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them." John 17:18 (NRSV)

On my desk, for years, surrounded by beautiful pictures of grandchildren, I kept a small chunk of concrete, about the size of a walnut. It's ugly. I kept it there for years because it is a piece of the Berlin Wall, picked up and brought to me by a member of this church. I kept it as a reminder, not only of that

great moment when the Wall came down, but also of an important Christian truth about the relationship of our faith, our church, with the world.

2009 is the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Communist regime in East Germany. Churches in Germany are celebrating the peaceful revolution — sometimes called the "Protestant Revolution" because of the major role churches played. In April of 1989 there was an Ecumenical Assembly in East Germany with delegates from all the main

churches. The Communists had relentlessly suppressed the churches. Marxist/Leninist ideology announced that religion was the opiate of the people, a narcotic that anesthetized people against injustice and suffering, and therefore there was no role for religion or churches in the new Communist order. Not all churches were closed but many were. The authorities were embarrassed by the presence of a large magnificent gothic church on the campus of Leipzig University, so they blew it up and replaced it with a gray administration building. Other churches

were turned into museums. Persecution was mostly non-violent but powerful nonetheless. Christians were not allowed to work in any government agency, not promoted and given tenure in universities, their children denied admission to good schools: church institutions — schools and hospitals were appropriated by the state, publishing houses closed down. And in the middle of all of that courageous Christians gathered in Assembly and demanded a level of freedom that simply does not exist in authoritarian Marxist regimes and which, the

authorities clearly understood, undermined their authority and the very existence of the government: The Assembly of Christians demanded freedom of opinion, freedom to travel, the right to form independent associations.

Bishop Christopher Kähler, of the German Episcopal Church, says that the meeting was the “handwriting on the wall.” People started flocking to churches after work, singing hymns, praying, lighting candles and then streaming into the streets in silent

protest. In Leipzig, Nicolae Kirche hundreds, then thousands of East Germans gathered, lighted candles, marched into the town square, filling the streets and then the ring road around the city. And the Communist regime fell — peacefully.

A member of the Communist party politburo, Horst Snidermann, said later: "We were prepared for everything, but not candles and prayers" (see *The Presbyterian Outlook*, 6/1/09).

A generation before, a young German pastor and promising theologian sat in a Nazi prison, arrested for participating in an act of radical defiance of another authoritarian government — the attempt to assassinate Adolph Hitler. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was his name. He wrote letters from his prison cell prior to his execution. In one of them he wrote that life in a prison is diminished to fear and hunger. But Christianity plunges us into all the dimensions of life. To be a Christian is to live fully in the world. He wrote: "During the last year or so I have

come to appreciate the worldliness of Christianity . . . the Christian is not a 'homo religiosus' but a man, pure and simple . . . I thought I could acquire faith by trying to live a holy life . . . Later I discovered and am still discovering . . . that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to believe" (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 226).

The relationship of our religion to the world, the relationship of churches to society is ambiguous. If there is a mantra almost everybody agrees on it is

that religion and politics don't mix, even though that notion is directly contradictory to the Bible, the idea of God in the Bible and the life and teaching of Jesus. Historian Glen Tinder says — "The notion that we can be related to God and not the world, that we can practice a spirituality that is not political is in conflict with the Christian understanding of God" (*The Political Meaning of Christianity*).

The opposite idea still has great currency, namely that Christianity is not about life in this world but the next

world: that worldly is something Christianity is not: that Christian attention is better focused on eternity than the life of the city or nation in the here and now: that Christianity is, as an old college professor of mine liked to say "pie-in-the-sky-in-the-bye-and-bye": that holiness, true, pure spirituality is to transcend life in this world, this body, this community, this time and place.

Barbara Brown Taylor has written a wonderful new book, *An Altar in the World*, in which she says that when, as a young woman, she decided that she was

a believer she joined a church to learn about God but instead learned to be suspicious of the world. That mirrors my experience exactly. I was a Presbyterian in the morning and a Baptist in the evening because my friends went to the Baptist youth group which was frankly a lot more fun than our Presbyterian effort: the Baptists taught me a lot of Bible and they also taught me to sing a little song —

“Be careful little eyes what you see

Be careful little eyes what you see

For the Father up above is looking down in love

So be careful little eyes what you see

Be careful little hands what you touch

Be careful little feet where you go

Be careful little ears what you hear”

And so on. The tune, by the way, is one of the tunes the organist at Wrigley Field plays to generate a little fan enthusiasm when things are slowing down in the field (which they have been recently) — and every time I hear it I think about the Baptist BYPU — Baptist Young People's Union — and "be careful little eyes, hands, feet," and the message that the world is a threatening, sinful, dirty place and a flower of Jesus will keep it at arm's length.

That thinking has a long history, all the way back to the ancient Greeks who

believed that reality is divided into two realms — matter and spirit — and spirit is a lot better than matter: and that human beings are divided between body and soul, and soul is a lot better than body. In fact your body can get you in a lot of trouble, not to mention that it is getting older by the day. Many early interpreters of Jesus were influenced by that Greek dualistic way of thinking: even though Jesus himself never talked like that. He was a Jew, and Judaism — in distinction from Greek dualism, holds that there are not two different realms, but one: that the world is a holy place:

that you find God in the world and holiness is life lived in the world.

The early Christians were influenced by the Greeks but they had another problem — their world was not a friendly place. In fact the world was hostile and dangerous. In a matter of a few decades Rome itself turned against them and began several centuries of brutal persecution. So the idea that Christians ought to withdraw from the world, escape from the world, made sense. The idea of monasticism — that true Christian life is lived away from the

world, literally walled off from the world — was powerful and remains so today.

Who doesn't long for a way to live more simply, to get away from the chaos, the violence, the dirt and noise of the world? Who wouldn't prefer a way to draw closer to God without all the distractions of the world? Who wouldn't prefer to be a little less captive to the body's insistent needs and urges and desires? "Get away from it all" the travel ads plead and who can argue with that? So, it is logical that sometimes church and religious faith becomes a

way to do just that: get away from the world.

And you can get away with that except for a few sentences in the New Testament. The first is in a prayer Jesus prayed at the table of the Last Supper. It's time for summing up, for final words. The end is near. And so he prays to God for his dearest friends, his disciples. He asks God to protect them , to keep them at one with one another, to give them joy in their life and work, and then this: "I am not asking you to take them out of the world — As you

have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world."

It could not be more clear. Jesus wants his followers to be in the world, wants his people in every age not to try to escape from the world, transcend the world, but to engage the world, to live in it thoroughly, to live their lives fully in the world — to love the world — just as God loved the world, to respect and honor and serve the world — just as he did.

The second sentence is one of my favorite Bible verses. It's a question: "Why are you looking up?" We know the occasion as the Ascension. Forty days after Easter, the risen Christ is still with his disciples. Now, he will return to God. Modern Christians stumble all over the event when trying to take it literally, we understand it in terms of space and time. But the idea it represents is among our most important and precious. "He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God" we affirm in the Apostles' Creed. Jesus is not dead, but alive, and sitting at the

right hand of God, is the authority, the final authority. That is to say, not sickness, suffering, not death, not injustice and oppression, not racism, sexism — any "ism" — but Jesus Christ is the final authority. That's what "ascended into heaven and sitteth at the right of God" means.

And when it happened, whatever it was, the disciples are confused, annoyed, astonished, impressed — and just then two young men appear and ask simply: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up to heaven?" It's time

to sop staring and get going: time to stop pondering eternity and start thinking about Jerusalem: time to stop whatever you were thinking by way of withdrawing from the world — and recommit yourself to it. The text continues — "Then they returned to Jerusalem."

The world is where the followers of Jesus are supposed to be: the world with all its messiness and violence and corruption — the world is still the object of God's love: the world is where God's people will live and work and love and

serve — and Jesus promised, the world is precisely where they will find joy.

In Barbara Brown Taylor's book I referred to earlier, *An Altar in the World*, she remembers a question an older, wiser clergy friend asked: "What is saving your life now?" The book is her answer — *An Altar — in the World*. She writes so eloquently: "What is saving my life now is the conviction that there is no spiritual treasure to be found apart from the bodily experience of life on earth. My life depends on engaging in the most ordinary physical activities

with the most exquisite attention I can give them. My life depends on ignoring all touted distinctions between the secular and the sacred, the physical and the spiritual, the body and the soul. What is saving my life now is becoming more fully human, trusting that there is no way to God apart from real life in the real world" (Introduction, XV).

We celebrated the 95th anniversary of this wonderful church building on Michigan Avenue last Sunday and we thought about and celebrated our history. And I am convinced that we are

uniquely strong today because of a decision my predecessor and the leaders of this congregation made forty-five years ago. There was a major upheaval happening in American culture, the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights movement, the sexual revolution, assassination of a President, and his brother and the leader of the Civil Rights movement, student protests, street riots. Sometimes churches were targets. Civil rights leaders, accusing the church of complacency if not attacking racism, walked down the aisles of churches, took over, occupied

pulpits. Churches caught in the midst of urban violence had valuable stained glass windows smashed, graffiti spray painted on the walls. In many cases their members had left for the suburbs a decade before — and in agonizing Board meetings churches decided to leave the chaos and violence and threat of the city and move to the suburbs. When moving was not possible many, if not most, churches did the prudent thing: locked the doors, covered up the stained glass, installed security systems, hired overnight guards — sometimes armed, built a chain link

fence around the building. And at just the critical dangerous moment this church did the most amazing thing: opened the doors, invited neighbors in, created programs to assist and stand with and serve: a Social Service Center, a Tutoring Program — bringing children from Cabrini Green into the church. It was not universally applauded, believe me. Some members didn't like it at all — didn't like it that "they" were coming into "our" building and took their membership elsewhere. But the church held firm, created more ways to serve: a Counseling Center, a program for older

adults, a Day School. Over the years the list continues to grow and the tradition deepens. The doors remain open every day. The city, the world is here — from 7 in the morning ’til 9 at night. Music and drama and art, counseling, food, clothing, shelter, education — the world is here every day. And I have concluded that the decision to remain and open the doors made in the midst of the stress and threat of the ’60s — saved this church’s soul and quite possibly its life. Hans Küng, the great theologian, said that the enemy of Christian religion is not atheism, but a form of Christianity

disconnected from life, from real human need, aspiration, hope and dreams.

And you, along the way, something else happened and continues to happen — joy, just as Jesus promised and asked God on behalf of his followers: joy and laughter — in life in the world, in faith — not providing an escape from the world but a way to engage and serve the world.

It’s personal for each of us: not just our institutional attachments, our belonging to a church that has decided

to risk living its institutional life as fully in the world as possible, but at a personal level to think like that, and to live like that: to love the world — this world, so deeply and passionately that you can’t get enough of it: to honor and respect and vale the gift of your own life to live it as fully as possible, every day of it, every moment of your precious and one and only life: to keep your eyes and ears and hands open to the miracle of every day and your heart vulnerably open to your loved ones, your friends, your neighbors.

Poets help. A poem a day, I find, reminds me to pay attention, to live more thoroughly in the here and now, to see and hear and touch and smell the sacred, the holiness of God all around us. Mary Oliver, Wendell Berry. I'm reading Denise Levertov at the moment — about trees and clouds and yellow tulips, warm bread, books and meals and precious people.

The last poem in the book is "Primary Wonder": (p. 129)

On the next to the last day in Italy, we drive to Assisi, a kind of pilgrimage. I had been reading about the Middle Ages, the medieval church, the amazing artistic creativity — and so I wanted to

see again the gorgeous Basilica where Francis of Assisi is buried, and the amazing frescoes by Giotto — one of the great treasures of the world, depicting Francis' life. And I thought about him — born into wealth, living a life of comfort and ease, his conversion and his sense of vocation — to live simply, to serve and love unconditionally — and to do, not in the relative security of a monastery, but in the world, radically in the world. Giotto's wonderful frescoes show him being in the world, helping the poor, tending the sick, loving the world and its creatures.

Francis understood that the holy life, the profoundly joyful life — is life lived thoroughly in the world, invested in the world, given away to the world in the name of his Lord Jesus Christ.

He left a prayer — a thoroughly human, this-worldly prayer — about hatred and love, strife and peace, hurt and forgiveness:

“Lord make us servants — in the world — this world — this time and place where you

us to be — to love and

serve and where you promise us

joy . . .”

Amen